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jazz fest

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From the Internet to Place des Arts

Miles From India concert a natural progression for former Miles Davis sidemen, musicians from India

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Question: What happens when you record 18 former Miles Davis sidemen with about the same number of top Indian musicians, jazz and otherwise, using the Internet as the intermediary?

Answer: Miles From India, a two-CD set that's as surprising and successful as any of the fusion music Davis recorded in the late '60s and '70s.

And what happens when many of these musicians meet up on stage? Montreal jazz fest patrons will find out today when they perform one of the most eagerly anticipated concerts at the festival.

"The first thought comes from the school of 'Let's imitate the record,'" says Bob Belden, the Miles archivist (and saxophonist in his own right) who created the concept and then produced it. "But with Miles From India, I told the musicians to listen to the record for the forms, but don't try to imitate it. It's going to take them a while to learn how to run with it because there's no leader. You need guys who think like they can orchestrate a different opera every night."

"The project isn't merely Miles Exotica Redux. The sounds are glistemingly new, by turns rhythmically propulsive, lyrical and flowery, meditative yet accessible, and – when you consider the globalization of music – a dream come true.

Belden says he's "just amazed it's gotten this far," but maybe it's a case of right place, right time. With the success of the movie Slumdog Millionaire, not to mention India's place in the global economy, mainstream Western interest in Indian culture hasn't been this high since the Beatles were entranced by Ravi Shankar's sitar in the '60s.

The idea for Miles From India came to Belden – who was preparing a box set for Sony of the early 1970s Davis sessions that produced On the Corner, with its strains of sitar and Indian percussions slithering through pile-driver funk rhythms – after a conversation with Yusuf Gandhi, head of world-music label Times Square Records.

"I was musing about how interchangeable Miles was with the use of Indian instruments and –

"I told the musicians to listen to the record for the forms, but don't try to imitate it."

Bob Belden

poof! – the concept was created at that moment. I happened to be in China, producing a record for EMI, so I thought I'd stop by India and just start recording sketches and themes I pulled from memory with musicians that Mr Gandhi recommended. Soon I was able to size up what was happening and then kind of alter the plan."

ROGERS AND COHAN

Miles From India's Badal Roy (left), V.K. Raman and Hidayat Khan.

What happened next was a wildly creative vindication of the cut-and-paste techniques pioneered by Davis producer Teo Macero on the In a Silent Way and Bitches Brew albums, updated for the Internet age.

"The whole production element of contemporary music stems from to some degree what Miles and Teo were doing. It was music that wasn't based upon static rhythms or concepts. They set the bar pretty high. With Teo it was like cutting the vein, like arterial surgery. Teo had to deal with a razor blade and hope to God they played the downbeat together. You can hear the edits on In a Silent Way, but on Miles From India you can't because technology has gotten to the point where we can make things seamless. I can take the blood vessels and arrange them in different directions without ever having to cut the vein itself, so I'm doing internal surgery without having to destroy the linear nature of the piece. By the time I did this record, Pro Tools and file-sharing had gotten to the point where all we needed was a faster Internet. You suspend reality: something played a month ago is now improved upon and put into context and when you put it together it seems like it was played all at the same time."

The Indian musicians were familiar with Davis, but not necessarily the individual tunes.

"They had no clue what the final product would sound like until they got the album in the mail, because they were just playing little bits and pieces. They were doing things I thought would translate well (to Miles material), without being too clever. I talked to the musicians to convey a sense of a living body of music like Bach or Beethoven. History means that you learn from the past and try to improve upon it. Musicians are now so used to reacting to pre-recorded material that there's none of that stigma of it all having to be constructed at the same time."

It all started with percussion. Indeed, tabla player Badal Roy – who worked in a Manhattan restaurant as a busboy and musician before getting the call from Davis to participate in the On the Corner sessions – is among the players coming to Montreal.

"Rhythm has been around since somebody figured out that a rock had more uses than killing somebody," Belden summarizes. "You go around the world and see how instruments are similar, but played differently. They got a groove in India that's crazy."

Miles From India plays at Théâtre Maisonneuve of Place des Arts tonight at 9:30. Tickets are $32.50, $38.50 and $44.50. Call 514-842-2112; order at pda.qc.ca.

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disc of the day

Astillero

Tango de Ruptura
Torquato Tasso

Montreal is one of the great tango cities, outside of Buenos Aires; the great Tango Nuevo artist Astor Piazzolla was largely introduced to North Americans via his appearance at the jazz fest in the early '80s. Astillero hopes to duplicate the feat, and this album goes a long way in that direction. Featuring two bandoneon players, a classically inspired string section and a theatrical singer, this septet features a more percussive quality than Piazzolla. With a non-corrupting sense of history (no electronics, por favor), their sound is by turns intensely lyrical and dramatic, even at times dangerous. This great personal discovery was on my personal Top 10 list of 2008.

Astillero plays on the General Motors stage tonight (July 4) at 9 and 11 p.m.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

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